

Ekádashii - Why to Practice Upavása

Upavása is an integral part of the Yogic Life. It has multiple benefits:

1. The Fasting State and Vaerágya
2. Mental Balance
3. Physical Health

1. The first benefit is the fasting state and vaerágya. On the day of upavása, one may naturally develop hunger in the morning; by midday or early afternoon, the body comes to understand that it is not going to receive anything by mouth that day, and this understanding generates a physiological state known as the “fasting state” which results in two principal changes: (1) it switches off the hunger mechanism, and (2) it converts the body’s physiology into a slower state which conserves energy. Both of these changes result in a feeling of natural distance from the things of the physical world. One is in the world, and yet, one gets a palpable feeling of being distanced from that same world – almost not part of the world. This distance easily gives rise to the bháva of vaerágya, in which the mind is not attracted to, not colored by, the objects of the world. Rága means color – the colorful attractions of the mundane world; vi-rága means the absence of these colors and attractions, and vaerágya is the virága bháva generated in the mind. As a result of this vaerágya bháva, the mind easily cultivates a feeling of deep attraction to that Supreme Consciousness, Parama Puruśa. On other days, the mind is more easily distracted by interaction with the mundane world because physical food is such an immediate connection to that created world. Food and drink keeps the mind engaged in the world; in their absence the mind is freed from worldly engagement and tends naturally to remain attached with the Supreme Entity. This feeling of special closeness to and attraction toward Parama Puruśa on this day is the reason for the námakaraṇam “upavása” – ‘upa’ meaning “near”, and ‘vása’ meaning “residing” – living very close to that Supreme Entity.

It should be noted that if one takes water, the effects described above will not occur. I have, due to being busy, spent many a day without eating until the

evening, just taking water during the day. So far as physiology is concerned those are just normal days; the body does not go into a fasting state, and the mind is as a result not transformed into its other-worldly vibe. The metabolic fasting state is not induced, the resultant feeling of distance from the mundane world does not occur, and hence the bháva of vaerágya and feeling of special closeness with Parama Purúsa (due to which the practice is called “upavása”) will not have the tendency to arise in comparison with other days. Just as with so-called “fruit fasts”, “no cooked-food fasts”, and other such things, the “water fast” is not upavása. It is merely a day of not taking food. All those who are for years practicing upavása can attest to the difference.

2. Mental Balance. Upavása is done on particular days of the month for a reason. During the period between ekádashii and púrñimá, as well as between ekádashii and amávasyá, due to the unique positions of the sun and moon the gravitational pull on the earth is greater and thus the tides of the oceans rise. The human body consists of 55-60% water, and, as with the water in the oceans, the water in our bodies is also attracted more strongly to the moon during these two periods, which results in increased pressure on the brain and its subtle functioning during that time. All emergency physicians are well aware of the phenomenon of mentally ill people (such as those with schizophrenia or bipolar disease) developing crises and presenting to the emergency room in greater numbers during the days approaching púrñimá and amávasyá. People who do not suffer from psychiatric illness, although unlikely to develop such mental crisis, are also more inclined to develop a lack of mental balance during these times of the month. To prevent that loss of mental balance, nirjalopavása is extremely helpful as it limits the amount of water in the body at that time and hence keeps the pressure exerted on the brain and its subtle functions low. Ekádashii is the first day of this period leading up to púrñimá and amávasyá and hence nirjalopavása is of particular benefit in protecting mental balance during this entire period. It should be noted that if one takes water during this day, one will not get the above-described benefit and hence the reason for doing upavása on the day of ekádashii will be negated.

3. Physical benefits. There are tremendous physical benefits from upavása. Firstly, the body takes a day of rest from physical digestion of food. It is quite natural to give the body such periods of rest from digestion. Indeed, animals living in nature

also engage in this practice. Secondly, it gives an opportunity for complete cleansing of the digestive tract. People bathe daily, but that only cleans the outside of the body. The digestive tract also needs to be cleaned. Those who have never practiced nirjalopavása and its cleansing practice the following day have not had an empty digestive tract in their lives since taking birth. That puts a lot of stress and strain on the digestive tract. Certain residues remain over the course of months and years, and this leads to compromise in digestive function as well as an increased risk of cancer of the digestive organs.

The physical repose given by nirjalopavása is vital to optimum physical health. Those who have been practicing nirjalopavása for years find that there is indeed no weakness at all on that day; rather, it gives rise to a special feeling of lightness to one's existence. Both mentally and physically one feels quite relaxed on the day of nirjalopavása. The mind is sharp, the body is strong, and there is no lack of energy. Indeed, one can do just as much physical work as on any other day. Although to be sure, owing to the special qualities of mental sharpness and vaerágya bháva during nirjalopavása, this day is best utilized in mental and spiritual engagement.

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